

MISCELLANEOUS. No. 29 (1916).

CORRESPONDENCE

WITH

HIS MAJESTY'S MINISTER AT BERNE

RESPECTING THE

QUESTION OF REPRISALS

AGAINST

PRISONERS OF WAR.

*Presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of His Majesty.
September 1916.*

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Correspondence with His Majesty's Minister at Berne
respecting the Question of Reprisals against Prisoners
of War.

No. 1.

*Mr. E. Grant Duff, His Majesty's Minister at Berne, to Sir Edward Grey.—
(Received July 20.)*

Sir,

Berne, July 19, 1916.

I HAVE the honour to forward herewith a letter addressed to His Majesty's Government by the International Committee of the Red Cross, drawing attention to the barbarous practice of reprisals against prisoners of war practised by some of the belligerent Governments.

I have, &c.

EVELYN GRANT DUFF.

Enclosure in No. 1.

*Translation of Letter from the International Red Cross Committee to Belligerent
and Neutral Countries.*

THE Red Cross, which, we are happy to say, has greatly developed during the present war, and which has exercised widely among belligerents, with the assistance of neutral Powers, its beneficent influence, was founded with one object, that of humanity.

Its creation was inspired by the desire to mitigate to some extent the hardships of war, particularly among those whom wounds, though not fatal, have rendered weak and harmless.

In the course of this war the vast number of combatants has produced a class of unfortunates of an almost novel type; for, if that class existed before, it never attained its present proportions. We refer to the prisoners of war. These, too, are powerless, incapable of resistance, delivered to the tender mercies of the enemy, who has compelled them to lay down their arms and to plead for their lives.

The prisoner who has emerged from the battle unscathed is certainly less to be pitied than the soldier who has been wounded and is confined to a hospital bed. Nevertheless, captivity, that involuntary exile, far from home, far from kindred, with whom communications are rare and uncertain, combined with prolonged idleness, causes moral torture, which grows as the war continues.

We recognise that in general the belligerents have done what they could to make the lives of the prisoners bearable and to avoid adding physical hardships to their unhappy lot. The tours of inspection by our delegates have revealed great improvements both in the organisation of the camps and in the treatment of the prisoners. But we have recently observed that a principle has been asserted, the application of which tends to become daily more vigorous: the principle of reprisals on prisoners of war.

Should a belligerent State have reason to believe that its soldiers in the hands of the enemy are not treated as they should be or that one of them has received unmerited punishment, it does not attempt to appeal to its adversary's feelings of generosity, nor does it address itself to the neutral Powers with the request that they will impress on the enemy concerned the considerations of humanity and justice. It has immediate recourse to the law of retaliation and acts in excess of its grievances. It hopes that the severity of the reprisals will compel the adversary to yield; and if the adversary, on the contrary, proceeds to further steps, they are countered by still more rigorous

measures. And then occurs what we see to-day, the development of the practice of reprisals into a barbarous competition of which the motive is vengeance, and of which the incidence is borne by those who are both innocent and powerless, until their cry of suffering touches their Government and compels it to renounce the measures taken against the prisoners in its hands. These reprisals are all the more unjust and cruel in that they are often provoked by inaccurate information.

The International Red Cross Committee cannot remain indifferent before that spectacle, before the repudiation of the principle on which the Red Cross is founded. War is in itself a scourge enough without increasing by inhuman practices and by useless severity the evils it brings in its train. Again, after the termination of hostilities, if the nations hope to attain a lasting peace, will not reconciliation be much more difficult after hatred has been fomented not so much by open and straightforward warfare as by the suffering inflicted in cold blood on unhappy defenceless prisoners?

We therefore, true to the duty which the status of the International Committee imposes on us, implore the belligerents to abandon the practice of reprisals on prisoners of war, and to renounce the principle which inspires it. Do not endeavour, we say, to exercise pressure on your enemies by the chastisement you inflict on those of their people who are at your mercy. Is not that a reversion to methods of barbarism unworthy of nations which have given to the Red Cross the position it occupies in their armies?

You are greatly concerned for the wounded, on whom you lavish cares, no matter under what flag they have fought. In that respect all testimony is unanimous. Why then should prisoners be treated in an entirely different manner? You complain that your people suffer unjustly in their captivity; why then not appeal to your opponent's sense of justice? Why not offer, should he respond to your appeal, to accord to his people a like favour? And, if you have difficulty in approaching him, why not send him that message through a neutral? Those are the ideals which should, as it seems to us, in the place of the present practice of reprisals, stimulate your rivalry: the rivalry of justice and of humanity, which, leaving behind memories of gratitude, would help to extinguish the fires of hatred, the great obstacle to peace.

Accordingly we do not hesitate to move the belligerents to adopt in the treatment of prisoners of war the methods indicated above. In giving effect on the prisoners' behalf to the motto of the Red Cross, "*Inter arma caritas*," the nations would render war less cruel, and would give a new impetus to civilisation.

Geneva, July 12, 1916.

No. 2.

Viscount Grey to Mr. E. Grant Duff.

Sir,

Foreign Office, August 11, 1916.

WITH reference to your despatch of the 19th ultimo, I transmit to you herewith the reply of His Majesty's Government to the letter from the International Red Cross Committee which accompanied your despatch.

I have to request you to communicate that reply to the International Committee.

I am, &c.

GREY OF FALLODON.

Enclosure in No. 2.

Memorandum communicated to International Red Cross Committee.

THE International Red Cross Committee have addressed to belligerent and neutral nations a letter, dated the 12th July, 1916, in which the Committee plead the cause of prisoners of war and deprecate the adoption by belligerents of the policy of reprisals.

His Majesty's Government have throughout the period of hostilities discountenanced that policy on account of its indiscriminating and unjust operation.

A succession of outrages has, however, been perpetrated by the orders, or with the cognisance and approval, of the German Government, of which the cumulative effect has been to strain the temper and patience of the British people to the breaking point and to create a situation of the utmost gravity.

It is unnecessary to attempt an exhaustive enumeration of those outrages, but among them may be mentioned the sinking, in contravention of the law of nations and the usages of war and in defiance of the most elementary principles of humanity, of the vessels "Lusitania" and "Sussex," whereby hundreds of defenceless civilians, many of them women and children, were sent to their deaths to the unconcealed satisfaction of the German press and people; the brutal execution of Nurse Cavell, whose sex and the fact that she had spent a blameless life devoted to the alleviation of suffering, and since the war had even nursed wounded German soldiers, should have been sufficient to secure a mitigation of her sentence; the criminal desertion by the German authorities of the camps for prisoners of war at Wittenberg and Gardelegen at a time when the unfortunate captives interned there were stricken with disease, itself aggravated, if not initiated, by callous disregard on the part of those in charge for the ordinary hygienic precautions which are essential in a crowded concentration camp; the confiscation by the German Government of about 20 per cent. of the remittances sent to British prisoners of war (combatant and civilian) interned in Germany; and the execution of the captain of the steamship "Brussels" after he had been sentenced to death for having committed an act of self-defence well recognised by the laws of war on sea.

The International Committee appeal to the belligerent Powers not to attempt to obtain redress for their grievances by resort to reprisals, but to request the neutral Powers to impress on the enemy concerned the considerations of humanity and justice.

His Majesty's Government readily respond to that appeal, being confident that the neutral Powers and the International Committee will recognise that the demand for reprisals grows in volume and urgency with the recurrence of abuses, and that the surest means of avoiding reprisals is to promote the abandonment of the policy which inspires them.

Foreign Office, August 11, 1916.

[The above reply was also communicated to the Governments of the Allied and neutral Powers through His Majesty's Representatives.]
